Radiation treatment to the head and neck

When radiation therapy is given to the head and neck, there are several side effects that can occur depending upon which part is being treated.

Your dentist should be informed before radiation therapy is initiated so you can receive necessary dental care. Dryness and soreness of the mouth, throat and tongue may occur. Good oral hygiene is important. If you have teeth, use a soft bristle toothbrush. Rinse your mouth frequently (especially before and after meals) with any non-alcoholic mouthwash. You can make your own mouthwash by mixing 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon baking soda in one quart of warm water.

Dentures should not be worn. They will cause the mouth and gums to be more irritated. Medications are available to help with soreness.

Saliva can become thick and sticky and decrease in amount. Drinking at least two quarts of fluids a day will help thin the saliva. A dry mouth may be a permanent effect of radiation.

Loss of appetite and taste changes can occur. Eating more frequent, smaller meals will help maintain your weight. Choose a variety of textures and colors of food. Add flavorings and seasonings. Avoid temperature extremes of foods and liquids. The dietitian will work with you. Taste changes may be a permanent effect of radiation.

Hair loss in the treated area will begin two to three weeks after starting treatment. The skin in the treated area may be sensitive. Clean the skin gently and use lotions as directed. Use electric razors for shaving.